Penn State Students Work with Penn State SBDC Clients to Develop Integrated Marketing Plans

Marketing 422, Advertising and Sales Promotion Management, is a senior-level capstone class in Penn State’s Smeal College of Business. One of the instructors, Carolyn Todd, works with the SBDC to find businesses for her student project case studies.

At the start of the semester, the students team up. Each team functions as an advertising agency. The teams visit the business site to understand how the business owners interact with their customers and discuss the marketing challenges the owners face. The teams work over the course of the semester to develop a fully integrated marketing and promotions strategy with a $25,000 budget. Half-way through the semester, the teams present an overview of their plan during a five-minute pitch to the business owner. At the end of the semester, each team gives a fifteen-minute presentation detailing how the business owner could invest the 25K to meet his/her marketing goals. The business owners decide if or how they will implement any of the ideas presented. These case studies provide valuable, real-world learning opportunities for the students.

During the fall 2015 semester, two Penn State SBDC clients participated in Carolyn Todd’s classes. Buttonwood Campground, a 350-site campground located in Mexico, Juniata County, is a long-term client of the SBDC. Executive Detail and Wash, a full-service mobile auto detailing business based in State College, Centre County, opened for business in 2015.

The forty-two students assigned to the Buttonwood Campground project visited the campground, with transportation provided by Penn State Outreach’s Engaged Scholarship fund. The students saw firsthand the amenities available to guests and were given the opportunity to kayak or tube through Buttonwood’s recently purchased subsidiary, Juniata River Adventures. The teams spent an estimated 1,300 hours developing the marketing plans for Buttonwood, focusing on how to increase overnight reservations during the spring and fall, and increasing the customer base for Juniata River Adventures. The prevailing theme through the marketing plans included focusing on “grand-travelers” or grandparents who travel with their grandchildren, as well as college and university groups within a two-hour radius who often organize retreats or outings.

Executive Detail and Wash used Ms. Todd’s car to demonstrate their service, which reclaims the water used during the wash. The forty-five students in this class asked questions to learn the capabilities of the technicians, as well as understand the target market the owners were focusing on. The teams reported they spent more than 1,100 hours developing their final presentations. All of the students readily admitted they were not in the target audience for these services, as students generally are living on a limited budget. Suggestions included reaching out to new and used car dealers and explaining to them the benefits of outsourcing their detailing service. Several teams recommended contacting individuals attempting to sell vehicles on Craigslist, explaining how a well-detailed car can command a sales premium. One team suggested targeting Penn State alumni who bring RVs to football games, offering to detail their unit before they return home after a weekend of tailgating.

For the spring 2016 semester, one SBDC client is working with another Marketing 422 instructor’s class. Penn State has set a goal to provide every undergraduate student with an Engaged Scholarship opportunity. The staff of the Penn State SBDC is looking forward to building on this partnership with the instructors of Marketing 422, which provides students with a valuable learning experience while offering tremendous benefits to the SBDC’s clients.